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‘Draining the English Channel’: The European Revolution in *Three Kingdoms* & Three Keynotes (by Simon Stephens, David Lan & Edward Bond)

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We have the character of an island nation – independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel. (David Cameron)¹

In this essay I investigate how three recent keynote speeches, delivered by David Lan, Simon Stephens and Edward Bond, make or challenge the case for metaphorically draining the English Channel that Cameron claims as a concrete illustration of Britain’s geographical and cultural isolation, and, by extension, its identity. The keynotes share a preoccupation with German theatre that leads me to ask two key questions: 1) how far are the ‘national’ sensibilities invoked by these practitioners the product of deep-rooted institutional difference, whereby financial and social structures of production bring forth fundamentally different kinds of theatre, and, 2) what is the relationship between the terms of such debate and the realities of practice? I read the arguments mobilised in these keynotes alongside an instance of practical collaboration between British playwright Simon Stephens and German director Sebastian Nübling that disrupts the ostensible clarity of a binary between stale tradition and vitalising innovation, simultaneously illustrating the

¹ From a speech titled *Britain and Europe*, given by Cameron at London’s Bloomberg HQ on 23 January 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jan/23/david-cameron-eu-speech-referendum>> [accessed 18 June 2014] (para. 17-18).

permeability of a new generation of European sensibilities, open to the generative potential of travel and collaboration.

Over the last decade in contemporary British theatre discourse, practitioners and critics have hailed (or derided) Germany as ‘the new’.² David Lan, artistic director of the Young Vic, assisted the flourishing of this trend when, in 2006, he began flying young directors selected from the Genesis Directors Project to Berlin for intense periods of theatre-going in order to, in his words, ‘blow their minds’.³ As Simon Stephens enthusiastically tweeted after watching Genesis Director graduate Joe Hill-Gibbin’s production of *Edward II* at the National Theatre in 2013, ‘A whole generation of young British directors seems inspired by Nubling [sic] and Ostermeier now. I see it again and again. I fucking love it.’⁴ Indeed, the keynotes featured in this essay reveal a sentiment gaining critical mass amongst practitioners: that British theatre makers have much to gain by looking towards their German counterparts. In 2011, organisers of the *Theatertreffen* in Berlin (an annual showcase of the year’s ten exemplary German-language productions as selected by a jury of critics) invited Stephens to give a speech on ‘Infinite Diversity in New European Writing’ at the

² Examples of British practitioners and journalists who cite German theatre as influential and inspirational have proliferated in recent years. For a representative sample see Simon Stephens’ *Guardian* article titled ‘Deutsch courage: why German theatre dares—and wins’, 9 May 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2012/may/09/german-theatre-dares-three-kingdoms>>; Andrew Haydon’s interview with Katie Mitchell on German theatre culture, 9 Dec 2013 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/waves-and-traces/>>; Mark Espiner’s *Guardian Theatre Blog* ‘What could British theatre learn from Berlin?’, 3 March 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/mar/03/british-theatre-berlin>> [all accessed 17 March 2015].

³ David Lan, *A Leap in the Dark*, 17 May 2012 <http://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/lon/pro/50j/Bildergalerie/BG_1/Speech_David_Lan.pdf> [accessed 18 June 2014].

⁴ @StephensSimon, 24 October 2013 <<https://twitter.com/StephensSimon/status/393414776921276416>> [accessed 15 July 2015].

opening of their *Stückemarkt*. He used the speech, entitled *Skydiving Blindfolded*, instead to elucidate the impact of seeing his work staged in Germany.⁵

A year later, the Goethe-Institut in London invited David Lan to speak on the occasion of its reopening. This German cultural institution had previously enabled the Young Vic to host German theatre designers and, in 2006 and 2009, sponsored Lan's young directors' trips to Berlin. Lan used his speech to unpack the rationale behind this pedagogical tactic, primarily through an account of his own liberating encounters with German work. His title – *A Leap in the Dark* – was the virtual echo of Stephens's *Skydiving Blindfolded*. Both titles suppressed the dominant sense (i.e. sight) as a metaphor for the vulnerable, yet releasing, effects of being thrust into a zone of 'unknowing' that characterises a practitioner's exposure to foreign practice. Both speeches suggested, too, how contact with the dizzying new perspectives offered by German theatre induces a kind of cultural vertigo in British practitioners that sends them reeling in new directions. Although at the point of delivering these speeches those directions remained somewhat shrouded in darkness, both men were clear that – for them – German theatre triggers *anagnorisis*, a recognition of latent insights with regards to British theatre, and their position within it, that must necessarily precede artistic innovation.

Superficially, that *anagnorisis* is a by-product of travel. As Lan emphasised, through quoting Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, 'you discover who you are by discovering who you are not. And you do that by encountering "the other"'.⁶ Stephens made a similar claim regarding 'travel' in *Skydiving Blindfolded*: 'When we

⁵ Simon Stephens, *Skydiving Blindfolded*, 8 May 2011 <<http://www.theatertreffen-blog.de/tt11/artikel-zu/stueckemarkt/skydiving-blindfolded/>> [accessed 18 June 2014].

⁶ Lan, *A Leap*.

travel abroad we see our home with a clarity that we may never have been offered before.⁷ Both men recognised, through ‘the other’ of German theatre, how the British sensibility (to use Cameron’s term) is constituted by insularity.

Lan developed the consequences of such a position: ‘We English’, he declared at the Goethe-Institut, ‘think we know it all’.⁸ In his view, Britain’s political, geographical and cultural blinkers prevent theatre makers from recognising the vital lessons of German theatre, lessons that might de-trivialise a British theatre in which ‘one leaves in the cloakroom one’s deepest, most adult understanding of what it is to be human alongside one’s umbrella’.⁹

In detailing those culturally specific lessons, however, the keynotes shifted from generalised accounts of the freeing effects of cultural displacement to endorsements of particular provocative qualities latent in German theatre today, qualities of which both speakers felt Britain is in vital need. Lan constructed his argument around a line abstracted from Goethe’s play *Faust*. He cited Mephistopheles’s self-dramatisation as he who ‘wills evil but who does good’ as a concise example of the philosophical bent of German thought.¹⁰ For Lan, ‘thinking about this [line] blows your mind’.¹¹ To will evil but to do good is an impossible contradiction, suggesting the predilection for paradox Lan imputed as central in German thinking, and in German theatre. He evidenced his claim through an extended case study of Thomas Ostermeier’s *Hamlet* (seen at London’s Barbican

⁷ Stephens, *Skydiving*.

⁸ Lan, *A Leap*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust Part One*. German-English edition, trans. by Peter Salm (New York: Random House, 2007) pp. 102-03.

¹¹ Lan, *A Leap*.

Theatre in 2011). Lan's analysis revealed a production that is 'profoundly this and profoundly that': audiences are 'knee-deep in Renaissance Denmark but up to our eyes in the present instant'; the production is 'authentically Shakespeare's *Hamlet*' and yet 'every rule we take for granted is broken'.¹² Although reading the subversion of his own spectatorial assumptions as integral to the production's aesthetics, Lan found its ability to be two things simultaneously illustrative of German theatre's unique facility in expressing 'the violently paradoxical nature of human psychology and society'.¹³

Whereas Lan drew on his experience as a spectator, Simon Stephens explored German theatre through his evolving collaboration with a particular director, subtitling his talk, 'five things I have learned from Sebastian Nübling'.¹⁴ Their relationship was inaugurated in Stuttgart in 2003 when Stephens watched Nübling's production of his second professional play, *Herons*. Despite being warned to brace himself for anger and disappointment by his agent and other playwrights, Stephens was much enthused. The reasons were two-fold. Firstly, unlike the detailed, unhurried naturalism of the premiere at London's Royal Court¹⁵, Nübling's *Herons* was 'ferocious and fast, sexy and angry'.¹⁶ Actors 'spat, swore, played American football with another character's arse, ran like lunatics and yelled the language with an energy that was as focused as it was furious'.¹⁷ Stephens's emotive adjectives evoke the language of affect. Functioning as an alternative to the language-based

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stephens, *Skydiving*.

¹⁵ The production premiered in the Theatre Upstairs on 18 May 2001 (dir. Simon Usher).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

systems of analysis dominating the late twentieth century (semantics, poststructuralism), 'affective resonances' prove more analogous to music, triggering visceral and emotional reactions that resist narration and interpretation. For Stephens, Nübling made language into *noise*, releasing 'a life latent in my plays that I'd not prescribed'.¹⁸

The second reason Nübling's *Hérons* challenged and revised Stephens' expectations concerned the director's decision to '[re-centre] two peripheral characters to the heart of the play'.¹⁹ Nübling, then, had understood the playwright's text as an invitation to create, as a point of departure rather than a blueprint. Stephens, intriguingly, has described Nübling's innovations as excavations of latent material – he saw the doubling and trebling of roles in Nübling's *Pornography*, for instance, not as an imposition on his play but 'dug out from its heart', just as he asserted the Trickster that Nübling invented in *Three Kingdoms* to have 'absolutely emerge[d] from the metabolism of the original play'.²⁰ Stephens's account of Nübling's interpretive strategies lends a playwright's authority to Nübling's directorial innovations, conveying the lingering traces of a Barthesian 'author function' that poststructuralism sought to expose and unravel in the late twentieth century.²¹ Assumptions about a director's fidelity to text persist, despite Nübling's process causing a reappraisal of Stephens' own preconceptions.

Nevertheless, in distilling his learning from Nübling, Stephens registered three important transformations in outlook: an affective turn in his approach to theatre; a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Simon Stephens's interview with Jacqueline Bolton in the Preface to the Methuen drama edition of *Three Kingdoms* (p. 2).

²¹ See Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) pp. 155-64.

new understanding of the playwright's role in a collaborative, multi-authored process; and an enhanced appreciation of the British sensibility – not only its arrogance, but also its attitude to culture. Stephens admired the fact that theatre enjoys the status of 'art' in Germany, where the 'endgame of theatrical culture' is an invitation to the *Theatertreffen*; in Britain, it's the possibility of a West End transfer.²² As David Barnett has argued, economic and infrastructural components play a key role in shaping German theatre, cultivating an appetite for intellectually challenging and formally innovative work through heavy subsidy and a decentralised network of venues.²³ Within this system, both ensembles of artists and local audiences are afforded the time to develop, support and adapt to artistic experimentation, insulated from the determining influence of poor box office returns. The commercial imperative that inevitably drives Britain's atomised infrastructure and itinerant cultural workforce, together with short rehearsal periods, makes it harder for approaches other than those previously tried and tested to flourish.

Based on the themes I've drawn out from Lan's and Stephens's keynotes, it could be argued that the play Stephens wrote for the purposes of a collaboration with Nübling and Estonia's Teater No99 pursued a distinctly German agenda. The text of *Three Kingdoms*, like Sebastian Nübling's 2012 production, is contradictory and slippery. Beginning as a crime procedural, the play depicts two British detectives tracing back the circumstances leading to the brutal decapitation of an Estonian sex

²² Stephens, *Skydiving*.

²³ See David Barnett, "'I've been told [...] that the play is far too German': The Interplay of Institution and Dramaturgy in Shaping British Reactions to German Theatre', in *Cultural Impact in the German Context: Studies in Transmission, Reception, and Influence*, ed. by Rebecca Braun and Lyn Marvin (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2010) pp. 150-66.

worker whose head has been fished out of the River Thames. As DI Ignatius Stone gets further embroiled in the case, which leads him across Eastern Europe to Hamburg and then Tallin, moral and epistemological certitudes are thrown into flux. In the play's last act, its emphasis wholly shifts to Ignatius and ambiguously hints at his dual status as victim and victimiser in a vast network of corruption (capitalism) that collapses the distance between local and global. Nübling's production responded with a progressive fragmentation of naturalism by surrealist elements, generating a theatrical hallucination that, according to Lan's framework, functioned as a kind of contemporary realism, exposing harsh truths about the human condition in advanced capitalism. Blurring genre boundaries, this perplexing play ended up mirroring, through Ignatius Stone, how impossibly implicated we all are in trans-national systems of corruption that reveal, as Dan Rebellato perceived, 'the dependence of innocence on guilt'.²⁴ This certainly evokes the paradox Lan associates with German theatre production; despite Ignatius's best intentions and his desire to pursue justice, Stephens' drama revealed the condition of being alive in advanced capitalism to be the direct inverse of (but equally as paradoxical as) that of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, turning even he who wills good into he who does evil.²⁵

That paradox, in this production of *Three Kingdoms*, generated another paradox in audience response that speaks to the distinction between affect and meaning resultant from Stephens' turn towards German theatre aesthetics.

²⁴ Dan Rebellato, rev. of *Three Kingdoms*
 <<http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2013/3/12/three-kingdoms>> [accessed 10 June 2014].

²⁵ This isn't such a new idea. St Francis de Sales, in his *Lettres d'Amitié Spirituelle* (1640) attributed the expression 'l'enfer est plein de bonnes volontés ou désirs' ('hell is full of good intentions and wishes') to the Cistercian abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153).

Endorsements of the production by British critics frequently registered a disturbing breach between content (the torture and execution of a sex worker, the pre-text of the narrative) and form (the exhilaration engendered by the production's innovative approach to theatrical art). As Andrew Haydon summarised, 'Perhaps the most interestingly contradictory thing about *Three Kingdoms* [. . .] is how joyous and freeing this parable about misery, suffering, sex-slavery, brutality, cruelty and murder feels'²⁶, an issue that raised significant concerns for a number of practitioners and critics.²⁷

This tension between expectations nurtured by a British social-realist tradition and the hazardous thrill of Nübling's freewheeling aesthetic can be addressed by introducing a third keynote speech, given by Edward Bond in Bochum, Germany, in 2012. Bond centred this talk on his reaction to seeing *Three Kingdoms* at the Lyric Hammersmith, a theatre that had revived his own 1965 play *Saved* just six months earlier. Bond's perspective proves illuminating alongside that of Stephens – both British playwrights have found success in Germany, and both *Saved* and *Three Kingdoms* (although four decades apart) transgressed moral boundaries in their explorations of extreme violence.

Despite these similarities, Bond used *Three Kingdoms* as the chief illustration of his argument that contemporary theatre is a theatre of symptoms, in which the repressed horrors of the twentieth century resurface in our drama as eroticised violence. His trenchant commentary spotlighted German directors' theatre and its

²⁶ Andrew Haydon, rev. of *Three Kingdoms*, 10 May 2012
<<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/three-kingdoms-lyric-hammersmith.html>>
[accessed 10 June 2014].

²⁷ See Maddy Costa's reflections on *Three Kingdoms* and misogyny:
<<http://www.statesofdeliquescence.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/fanning-bonfire.html>>
[accessed 12 June 2014].

new and dangerous association with British playwriting, which, according to Bond, has lost its way; for him, Stephens's and Nübling's persistent affiliation exposes such a development and its troublesome implications. Bond asserted that 'the *future* is the hidden purpose of drama, of all art'²⁸, however, in contemporary work playwrights and directors are stuck in a present tense in which they reflect – or worse, marketise as entertainment – society's diseases. Drama, in Bond's psychoanalytical reading, can no longer imagine the future because it hasn't processed our traumatic twentieth-century past. His particular problem with *Three Kingdoms* involved its final act, in which 'the actors moved in syncopated rhythmic jerks to a constant percussive musical beat' whilst 'some of the young audience clicked their fingers and jerked along with [Nübling's] death animated zombies'.²⁹ What particularly irked Bond was that, as the play ended, spectators 'whooped with joy, the satisfied victimisers-victims of contemporary culture', seemingly (and obscenely) having forgotten that a woman had been murdered.³⁰

For Bond, the situation – the decapitation of the sex worker Vera Petrova – became subsumed in an aesthetic affective experience, and sublimated into what he labelled as the cliché of the 'devil in all of us'.³¹ Audiences were invited to become absorbed in the ambiguities of a plot in which time – and moral traction – slipped away, entangled in the kind of 'violently paradoxical psychology of human nature and society' that Lan perceived in Ostermeier's *Hamlet*.³² According to Bond's logic,

²⁸ Edward Bond, *The Third Crisis: the State of Future Drama*, 7 June 2012
<http://www.edwardbond.org/Comment/bochumtalk.docx> [accessed 12 June 2014] p. 2.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

³¹ Ibid, p. 5.

³² Lan, *A Leap*.

Three Kingdoms reproduced violence as an intractable aspect of human nature rather than as a social and cultural phenomenon whose causes an audience member can trace backwards (like the stoning of the baby in *Saved*), thus allowing them to discover their humanity in the play's mechanics. Instead, this production remained blocked by a past it couldn't process, aimless and dissociative, and plagued by the symptoms of its own repressed trauma.

Although Bond undermined some of his ideas by trading in wild stereotypes and generalisations, it is helpful to take seriously his assertion that 'after the last three German productions of my plays [...] I felt degraded as a writer'.³³ He also cited Sarah Kane telling him that the only time in her life she'd felt she'd written something obscene was after watching her play *Blasted* staged in Hamburg: 'She asked how anyone could get everything – everything! – so wrong.'³⁴

Is Bond just a traditionalist who refuses to acknowledge that the playwright's words do not automatically generate a specific production style? He staunchly defends a model of theatrical production that, in his eyes, although dominant for 2,500 years, risks obliteration. Might this be the resulting dissonance unleashed by a turn towards a *postdramatic* theatre, one that redefines the relationship between performance and politics? Contemporary performance culture has been in the grip of these ideas since Hans-Thies Lehmann's provocative 1999 German language study *Postdramatic Theatre*, in which he indexed the characteristics of European and North American experimental theatre since the 1970s.³⁵ Lehmann's study, which

³³ Bond, *The Third Crisis*. p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁵ See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

only appeared in English in 2006, documents exactly the uncoupling of theatre and drama against which Bond fulminates, shifting emphasis from the representation of a fictional cosmos (derived from a playwright's text) towards presentation – what the editors of *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* describe as a 'kind of loosening of onstage phenomena from conceptual, referential, representational logics'.³⁶ David Lan and Simon Stephens, in their ebullient advocacy of German theatre, certainly welcome the interventions of directors who tackle, in formal terms, the false neatness of logocentrism. For them, a dramaturgy of clearly delineated conflicts can no longer adequately represent contemporary experience. Bond understands such a 'loosening of onstage phenomena' as a gesture of representational refusal, but for him this reflects the director's propensity to obscure the moral challenges that inhere in the texts of 'traditional' playwrights. Simon Stephens, a writer whom Bond admires, has been tainted by Sebastian Nübling. Whilst Lan and Stephens 'leap into the dark', Bond accuses Stephens and Nübling of blindness. Intriguingly, German and British sensibilities are invoked throughout these keynotes, whether championing or critiquing contemporary experimental developments in theatre practice.

German theatre, however, is hardly a uniform institution itself. One of its most internationally renowned directors, Thomas Ostermeier, is frequently at pains to emphasise the sense of alienation he experiences within his native theatre ecology, claiming that his practice meets opposition from critics, festival makers, and juries in Germany because it is too much in thrall to the dramatic text. At a roundtable event on European Theatre at the Goethe-Institut in 2013, Ostermeier decried the

³⁶ Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles, 'Introduction', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles, (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013) pp. 1-30 (p. 11).

influence of Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, accusing the book of spawning a powerful movement amongst critics and practitioners that has relegated his own interest in plays and storytelling to the 'completely old school'.³⁷ Indeed, Ostermeier emphasises the importance of the 'situation' in his practice, deriding much of what he has seen in Berlin as 'art crap' that is miserably detached from reality.³⁸

Such a position is striking when we consider that, together with Sebastian Nübling, Ostermeier is positioned as a crucial mediator between British and German theatre in David Lan's keynote, and in Simon Stephens' tweet about *Edward II*. Such a status derives from the literal accessibility of these directors' productions at London's Barbican Centre (where Ostermeier brought a fifth production in September 2014) and the Lyric Hammersmith. Gaining entry as the 'acceptable faces' of German theatre through these key British cultural institutions, Ostermeier and Nübling have been saluted (or reviled) as infiltrating agents whose explosive productions have shaken the foundations of a theatre committed to a dramatic, text-based paradigm. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the underlying realist proclivity of Ostermeier's work renders its aesthetic provocation easier to digest for British audiences.³⁹ Ostermeier doesn't pursue the same degree of radicalism as Germany's more extreme wing; it is hard to imagine, for instance, directors like Frank Castorf, René Pollesch, or Einar Schleef establishing a comparable following at the Barbican. Although playfully overstating his outsider status, Ostermeier

³⁷ Thomas Ostermeier, in discussion during a roundtable event on 'European Theatre' at the Goethe-Institut, London, 23 Jan 2013. Transcribed by the author.

³⁸ See the transcript of Max Easterman's interview with Thomas Ostermeier for the Goethe-Institut <www.goethe.de/ins/gb/lon/pro/doppelgaenger/Ostermeier_Transkript.pdf> [accessed 20 June 2014] p. 3.

³⁹ See Fowler, review of Ostermeier's *Hamlet*, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31.4 (2013) pp. 737-745.

registered a genuine sense of estrangement when he quipped that his was ‘the only dramatic theatre [left] in Berlin. The rest is post-dramatic’.⁴⁰

A way of resisting the construction of an impassable divide between these positions may be found in Lan’s and Stephen’s keynotes: a vision of Britain and Germany yoked together to form a single theatrical ecosystem.⁴¹ Their accounts make clear that the aesthetic freedom of a state-funded, risk-taking, director-led German culture inspires and influences our own practitioners. At times, the reciprocal appeal of British playwriting for some German directors has proven useful in redressing the German taste for deconstructions of the classical repertoire. However, despite major systemic differences between theatre making in the UK and Germany, it is worth considering whether the stress put on these factors sometimes overdetermines aesthetic debate in cultural commentary. The recent ‘postdramatic’ emphasis has prompted re-evaluations of art, its status and its political potential in contemporary society within and beyond Germany, just as debates concerning performance and ‘Werktreue’ (faithfulness to the play) continue to be invoked in Germany even in the twenty-first century.⁴² In a similar vein, Katie Mitchell is a prominent example of a British practitioner who managed to, in effect, replicate a state-funded repertory system at the height of her powers as an associate artist with the National Theatre over many years of exploratory workshops and productions with a consistent artistic team. As practitioners themselves continue to travel, to

⁴⁰ Magnus Florin & Hannes Meidal, *Thomas Ostermeier besökte Stockholm*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 February 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2RyE2yWprw>> [accessed 2 August 2012].

⁴¹ I am grateful to Dan Rebellato for this insight.

⁴² See David Barnett, ‘Offending the playwright: directors’ theatre and the “Werktreue” debate’ in *German Text Crimes: Writers Accused*. *German Monitor* 77 (2013) pp. 75-97.

train abroad, and to collaborate, reaping the benefits of a linked ecosystem, generalised distinctions between national aesthetics continue to erode.

This condition may characterise a new kind of work emerging from recent European collaboration. Thomas Ostermeier's own celebrated uptake of British (and Irish) New Writing in Berlin in the late 1990s was only the latest iteration of a trend that saw Peter Stein seize upon Edward Bond's play *Saved* in the 1960s. Similarly, the Berliner Ensemble's legendary tour to London in 1956 cast long shadows over post-war British theatre, impacting significantly on the nascent aesthetics and ideologies of institutions like the NT and RSC. Nevertheless, although these brief examples of cross-cultural contact are bilateral, they have historically only involved a move in one direction at a time.

Working today, Stephens – like Ostermeier, or Katie Mitchell, a British director with ties to theatres across Europe – belongs to a generation who came to artistic maturity post-1989, in an era of collapsing physical and ideological European boundaries. In the work of this mobile generation, national styles and sensibilities have become harder to discern. Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz developed 'transculturation' in 1940 as an umbrella term describing merging and converging cultures. It connected the already existing word 'acculturation' (which described the acquisition of foreign cultural material) with another process – what Ortiz termed 'neoculturation', or the 'consequent creation of new cultural phenomena'.⁴³ Neoculturation described something analogous to the reproductive process between

⁴³ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. by Harriet de Onís (London: Duke University Press, 1995) p. 103.

individuals: 'the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them'.⁴⁴

Neoculturation helps us conceive of this generation of individual European practitioners as nodes in a complex network of creative relationships, spawning artistic products that register something of both parents. Jacqueline Bolton has begun to document such complex family histories elsewhere in these pages, tracing the genesis of Blanche McIntyre's 2013 production of *The Seagull* to a workshop with Nübling, Stephens, Sean Holmes and Edward Bond. Projects like these, and collaborations along the lines of *Three Kingdoms*, invite a neoculturation of critical vocabularies and the forging of new perspectives from which to view and discuss such work.

Nick Tennant's performance as Ignatius in *Three Kingdoms* acts as a synecdoche for what such a critical approach might apprehend. His performance juggled psychological realism with the demand for swift adjustments to the performance genre (something which German actors are often asked to accomplish), frequently using his body to create dynamic physical action that didn't always correspond with the logic of his speech. His character became, palpably at points as his body betrayed exhaustion, indistinguishable from his effort as a performer. As a result, his performance fascinatingly wove realist praxis (his own cultural heritage) into a new form of acting that absorbed, and resisted, the stresses and challenges of Nübling's direction, whilst fashioning something original.

There is a hybridity that emerges from new networks and the unique idiosyncrasies of contemporary theatre experiments with complex ties to theatrical

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 103.

traditions. In the light of this point, there may be a case to make for reinstating the initial keynote title that Stephens rejected, embracing the ‘infinite diversity’ of the ‘new Europeans’. Thomas Ostermeier, for instance, is making a kind of contemporary theatre that isn’t wholly unmoored from the old vocabularies of political theatre, seeing playwrights as the vital link between his stage and today’s society, and using dramatic material as the basis for a ‘neo-realist’ approach.⁴⁵ Similarly, practitioners like Simon Stephens and Katie Mitchell – each in their own way – long ago confounded Cameron’s sense of a fixed British sensibility to become *European* theatre makers, digesting foreign influences as they’ve re-formed their personal aesthetics, and presenting through their practice a far more nuanced picture than sometimes surfaces in debate.

Far from making British theatre more German, or being predicated on a rejection of history in favour of ‘the new’, collaborations like *Three Kingdoms* braid together traditions and experiences, stimulating ways of seeing that are potentially as infinite as the number of collaborators involved. Rather than being separated by a wide channel, contemporary practice – as Stephens’ own work exemplifies – is fed by multiple tributaries. Although Lan and Stephens are quick to identify a particularly German sensibility in contemporary theatrical enterprise, the peculiar similarities between the statements of Ostermeier and Bond remind us of nuances and idiosyncrasies that complicate the idea of deep-rooted institutional difference. Moving beyond national stereotypes, *Three Kingdoms* is a strong example of practice that confronts audiences with rich complexities, born out of the contingencies of the

⁴⁵ *Der Auftrag*, a mission statement published by the new artistic leadership of the Schaubühne in 2000, contained the following statement: ‘Die Verbindung eines Theaters zur Welt ist der Autor’ (‘A theatre’s connection to the world is the author’) <<http://www.schaubuehne.de/uploads/Der-Auftrag.pdf>> [accessed 20 July 2014].

unique perspectives that gave it form. In addition, as the production itself toured between the European city centres that feature in Stephens's text, it radically complicated the idea of a homogenous 'we' in the audience. *Three Kingdoms*, as well as its makers, travelled; in doing so it began to make meaning in new ways as it mated with new minds in new places. Although, as a kind of shorthand, the desire to embrace a 'German' aesthetic expresses the frustrations that some feel with the mainstream dominance of a generically 'naturalist' praxis in Britain, theatre makers are realising more varied, complex and unanticipated possibilities than those that sort easily between a German, or a British, aesthetic.